

Office dress: Up and down the codes

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Even the most strait-laced UK firms have begun relaxing their dress codes and allowing staff into work without a suit. But just as battalions of British workers are discovering the joys of "business casual", it appears their American counterparts are starting to dress up again.

Led by the young guns in Silicon Valley, many youthful US workers are finding that a formal suit has various advantages over casual dress - one of which is that it differentiates them from their forty-something bosses.

So do UK workers prefer to dress up, or dress down?

Phillipa Bergin, 28, is a researcher for a City law firm. She prefers wearing a suit.

Luke Nolan, 33, works in the foreign exchange department of a City bank. He would like to go totally casual.

They chart the ups and downs of dress codes:

DRESS UP

What are the rules? - The company's ruling is "business casual" for anyone who wants to. But no-one has really taken it up. Most people are still coming to work in suits.

What do you wear? - I wear suits most of the time. I've got four and just rotate them. It's very easy. I dress down occasionally - say on a Friday if I'm going away for the weekend straight from work.

How do you feel? - I know dressing down is supposed to make you feel more relaxed and release your creativity and so on, but I've dressed down occasionally and didn't find it made any difference at all. A friend says 'loose dress, loose attitude'. But I don't find that either - well, not unless I've been to the pub.

Is it expensive? - "Business casual" definitely costs a lot more, because the "casual" you wear at work isn't the same as the "casual" you wear at home. So you end up having kind of three ranks of clothes.

Is it easier? - Wearing a suit is so much easier. You just get up in the morning and grab one. Ironing shirts is a bit of a pain, but otherwise the only problem is making sure you've got a clean shirt and that your tights aren't laddered.

Does casual mean chinos? - Casual dress codes are much easier for women than they are for men, because you've got a much wider choice. If you're a man, you're practically forced to wear chinos and Ralph Lauren shirts.

Should the rules relax further? - I've always been used to wearing a suit at work, so the rules suit me. But if I'd started work in an environment where dress was casual, that would suit me more. It's just about what you're used to. But I like going home and putting on my combats or whatever, it tells my brain I've finished work.

DRESS DOWN

What are the rules? - The company introduced full-time "business casual" about a month ago, and most people have taken it up. Before that, it had dress-down Friday for some time.

What do you wear? - It's not total casual here, it's business casual with very strict rules - no denim, no running shoes, and you must wear a shirt with a collar. Ideally, I'd dress completely differently.

How do you feel? - I couldn't say that dressing down has made any difference at all, no. It hasn't made any difference to the work we do. But at a previous office where I worked, you could wear whatever you liked. People did seem more relaxed there. But that's probably symptomatic of the relaxed atmosphere of a firm which lets you wear what you want.

Is it expensive? - I did have to splash out on a few bits and pieces when the new rules came in, so it did cost me a few quid. I didn't have any shirts that weren't formal. But it's probably stuff I'd have had to replace anyway.

Is it easier? - It doesn't make a huge difference. It's basically the suit without a tie. But you have to think about what you're going to put on in the morning.

Does casual mean chinos? - There are so many strict rules that basically it is just another uniform. It's a bit like being back at school again.

Should the rules relax further? - You should be able to wear whatever you want. Obviously, if you turned up in about 45 earrings and ripped jeans, there could be a problem. But most people have common sense, and they're going to look neat and tidy. Especially in the City: no-one's going to take the Michael because it's too easy to be shown the door.

Vocabulary

Read the text and explain the following from context.

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